

Ask an Expert – Beyond the Toy Aisle: Meaningful Gifts from Grandparents

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Christmas morning can feel like a whirlwind of plastic packaging, blinking lights, and toys that break before the New Year. Kids may also become overstimulated and lose interest before they even get to breakfast. How can grandparents give a gift that lasts longer than the batteries? Two USU Extension experts, Callie Adams and Andrea Schmutz, share tips and personal experiences.

Callie: My grandparents would send \$10 in a card for us. As a kid, it wasn't very exciting, but as an adult, I can see the wisdom in spreading Christmas cheer equally among 35 grandkids, ranging from infants to teens. When children, grandkids, and in-laws are on your gift list, you need to be practical – but practical doesn't have to be impersonal.

Consider these meaningful, lasting gift ideas that go beyond the toy aisle.

Pay for Experiences

- Lessons: Ice skating, karate, music, art – opportunities to help them explore their interests.
- Camps: 4-H camp, science camp, or other options tied to their hobbies.
- Memberships: Zoo, museum, or local rec center passes.
- Subscription boxes: Monthly subscriptions such as KiwiCo, CrunchLabs, or Tinker Crate offer hands-on STEM activities.

Callie: A family favorite is when my mom hosts an annual "Grandma Camp" where all the grandkids come together

for crafts, games, and bonding. It's a highlight for them, and the memories last far longer than any toy.

Create Traditions

- Holiday sleepover: Snacks, matching pajamas, and a Christmas movie marathon.
- Baking day with grandma: Pass down family recipes and make memories.
- Horseback rides with grandpa: Or any meaningful one-on-one outing.

Callie: A youth leader hosted a day for us to help her make Rice Krispies treat bears. This was a wonderful memory and a fun day in the kitchen. We made the treats, wrapped them, and delivered them to others. Grandparents could easily adapt this idea to make and take with grandchildren.

Handmade with Heart

- Pillowcases, blankets, or quilts: Something cozy that reminds them of you.
- Storybooks or journals: Write down family stories or memories.
- Ornaments: One each year with a note about why it's special.

Andrea: Crochet scrubbies, hot pads, or other useful kitchen accessories. When money was tight, I learned to crochet dish scrubbies and gave them to neighbors and friends. They cost little to make, and people seemed to love them. Later, when I felt I could spend a little more, someone told me, "Don't change your gift – I look forward to new scrubbies each year!"

Gift Cards with a Twist

- Pair a gift card with a promise: "This is for our next ice cream date," or "Use this, and we will go pick out a book together."
- Create a coupon-gift card combo, such as a coupon for an outing with grandpa or grandma, and a stop for treats after.
- Build a tradition by doing the same things each year, i.e., a movie night or a breakfast outing. Over time, it will become a cherished ritual.

Invest in Their Future

- 529 College Savings Plan contributions: A gift that grows with them. Include a note explaining how this can support their future goals.
- Savings bonds or stock shares: A simple way to teach financial literacy and long-term thinking.

Andrea: Give the gift of a book that teaches finances in a fun way. Then set up a “date” to share takeaways from the book. This could be an in-person outing, FaceTime, or a phone call. For older grandkids, consider books like *The Latte Factor*, *The Wealthy Barber*, or *The Richest Man in Babylon*. For younger grandchildren, try *The Berenstain Bears’ Trouble with Money* or *Alexander, Who Used to Be Rich Last Sunday*.

The most meaningful gifts we give our grandchildren aren’t found on shelves; they’re found in the time, love, and experiences we create. Whether you choose to invest in their future, spark their curiosity with experiences, build traditions, or craft something with your own hands, these gifts become touchstones your grandchildren will remember long after the wrapping paper is gone. Christmas doesn’t have to be louder, flashier, or filled with more “stuff.” It can be slower, sweeter, and centered on connection, a gift no toy can ever replace.

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